

Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

March 27 2009: Expectations for Church Members



I attended a very strange funeral a few weeks ago, for the son of a lady who attends our church. Like many of his generation (he was late 30s, early 40s when he died), he had fried his brain on drugs, and had done some other activities that resulted in a permanent head injury. It is uncertain how much these experiences had impaired his cognitive abilities, for when I had met him on a few occasions, he certainly seemed reasonable, and

all the stories told about him at his funeral by his intimates testified to his ability to plan and execute. However, he had taken up a lifestyle of crime, and had been in and out of prison. In fact, when he died, he was carrying a pistol (it's illegal for ex-convicts to have firearms, of course), and there was a warrant out for his arrest for some minor infraction (traffic violation, I think). He had fathered children by several women, a few of which he had actually married. In fact, when he died, he had just married a woman whom, just a few weeks prior, he had been sharing with her previous fiance. According to the stories his friends were telling, he had committed bank fraud and petty theft.

When he had emerged from prison the last time, he was drawn into the church which was now conducting his funeral. The pastor of this church is himself a rough character with a storied past, and the outreach for this church (start-up, really; they are guests in another (dying) church's facilities, and in Southern Baptist terms, you don't "make it" as a proper church until you have enough paying members to have your own building and stable salary) is other "outsiders": addicts, prostitutes, ex-cons. I have to give him credit for reaching out to (and having credibility with) people who may not be accepted by the typical "traditional" church fellowship. So even though the recently deceased had grown up in a traditional church, with a mother who professes Christ and attempts to model Christianity in her home (at least her concept of Christianity), he did not make his own profession of belief until he did it with this credible pastor.

At the funeral, the pastor was assuring the dead man's children that he was a Christian, and he was now in heaven. Now, I know where he is coming from, for as a Southern Baptist myself, I am aware of the prooftexts, such as:

And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all, and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand

John 10:28-29

and

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shall believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.

Romans 10:9

To which I will counter:

Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

James 2:19

and

For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

Ephesians 5:5

Christians for a long time, perhaps from the beginning (since James and Paul were addressing the phenomenon), seem often to believe (even despite sermons to the contrary) that there are two parts to being a Christian:

- **"Believing" in Jesus (which usually means, believe that the Sunday School stories are true, and expressing this by the "magic salvation prayer"), and**
- **Being good (which usually means, obeying the Ten Commandments and other convenient "laws" in the Old and New Testament that reinforce the local church culture, including "no drinking, dancing, or smoking", "women have to wear dresses and hats to church", and "no tattoos or piercings")**

I say, *NO!* Based on what Paul and James and Peter and the other Apostles and Church Fathers taught, it isn't "believing facts about Jesus" that makes you right with Jesus (for certainly the devils know *all* the facts about Jesus, better than we can), or adhering to the Law of Moses (Paul wrote the book of Galatians to counter that notion). Rather, it's

- Trusting Jesus and His substitutionary sacrifice to make us right with God, and
- Loving Jesus, modifying our behaviour (with the Spirit's help) to Love One Another and strive for moral (rather than merely legal) purity.

So there's another spectrum of church cultures in play.

Moral Blindness

Legalism

On one end is legalism, which is clearly wrong. "If you don't do "X", or if you do "Y", then you're just not a Christian". Many of our (especially evangelical) churches are like that, and the people *believe* this or *act* like this, even if it isn't taught from the pulpit. It is just *this* environment that makes others, particularly the "outsiders" that this pastor reaches out to, feel unwelcome and unaccepted in so many of our traditional churches. The other end is occupied by, for instance, liberal mainline churches who, in their desire to attract and retain a membership, will accept and even affirm lifestyle choices that are unholy and immoral, the sin that excludes us from God, according to I John 3:3-10.

Somewhere in the middle is that correct expectation that believers should have of one another - a striving but not obtaining for moral purity, a forgiveness and restoration when sin occurs (as it always will) followed by repentance and renewed commitment. Holding each other accountable for purity. Helping one another to purity. Subjecting ourselves to one another for the sake of purity. It just isn't honoring to Christ if we do anything else.

I don't know if "moral blindness" is really the environment that this pastor is trying to foster in his church. I don't know that the man *isn't* in heaven; only God knows. I only know that the pastor kept emphasizing that his church was "welcoming". From what I could see, there was no difference in his life after "giving his heart to Jesus" from before. I know there was no mention of any struggle the man may have had with his moral choices (even though the pastor and his friends affirmed that the man "used" (drugs, still), lived with various women outside of marriage, shoplifted, etc.), or any notion that a purported believer *ought to struggle* with their moral choices. Yes, I know a funeral is not the time to point out someone's failings. Yet, there were unbelievers present. What impression are they getting of the Truth? What are the children being taught when they are told "your daddy is in heaven" despite his moral character that they were certainly aware of? Is a church membership, or "success" at reaching a people group, so important that we compromise or misrepresent the holiness of God?

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And yet, I don't need to point fingers at other churches so much as my own. My own youth group, in fact. Perhaps the "spectrum" concept above is incomplete, for my church (and others I've been in and visited) is characterized neither by moral blindness nor legalism, so much as a studied avoidance of the issue. I believe we welcome visitors without judgment. I believe we do not hold legalistic expectations of others. However, *we do not hold any expectations of each other at all*. Except that they should attend "worship" service on Sunday morning. Is there sin in the fellowship? Of course there is. Sometimes we know about it. But we don't bring it up, lest someone be offended and cease attending. My church is a "let's all get along and be happy" fellowship. The only expectation we have is that everyone is comfortable, and nobody is offended.

To the extent that "making disciples" includes fostering a love for Jesus that results in a passion for moral purity (among many other things), the "let's all get along" church fails at making disciples. Of course, it doesn't end there. A church may have opportunities for education (such as "Sunday School"), but no expectation that someone participate. A church may have opportunities for fellowship and commitment (such as small-groups), but no expectations that all the members should participate. A church may have opportunities for *real* worship (such as prayer meetings), but no expectations that *anybody* participate. A church may have opportunities for ministry (such as labour crews, or support for a local school), but no expectation that members participate. A church with *opportunities* but no *expectations* isn't going to be much of a church.

March 7 2009: Church Insanity

As I study this whole "what's wrong with the modern church" topic, one theme that shows up constantly is:

*If you always do what you've always done,
you'll always get what you've always got.*

It's been said often elsewhere, that one possible definition of insanity is "doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results". If that's the case, it seems to me that our Christian churches and organizations suffer from a touch of this insanity, even if individuals in these groups don't.



Church: Near and dear, my own Central Baptist. We are in hard times, we may not survive, we may not deserve to. In the recent distress, the pastors have cancelled (or rather, suspended) Sunday School, and instead, we have a prayer time (poorly attended) and a "family" discussion time. The discussion time started off to express our reactions to the worship service after the Element band joined in. However, since

Central Baptist is a typical traditional evangelical church, the members are accustomed to sitting passively in the pews watching the pastors "lead" out in front, on the stage. Discussion time is the same way, with the lay members sitting in the pews and the pastors up in front trying to get them to participate. *We've always done it this way, how can we expect different results?*

Therefore, since the people are not responding, the pastors want to cancel the discussion time. To my way of thinking, the "family" discussion time is potentially more fruitful than the "worship" service, especially if we can talk about what our problems are instead of focusing yet a bit more on the "worship" service. So I pipe up anyways: I point out that **If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got.** Heads nod in tentative agreement. Then I point out that we are still doing what we've always done: a "worship" service with singing songs and listening to sermons. The near-death state of the church is the *result* of doing what we've always done.

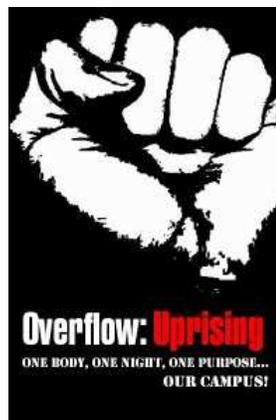
There were two possible responses to this statement: Agreement, followed by a serious discussion of what we could do *differently*. Or disagreement, and an argument for how I was wrong. Of course, the disagreement is what happened.

This took two forms. First, a challenge to the conditional: "But we *aren't* doing what we've always done. We *have* made changes." I guess I need to explore what changes these people thought we have made; given that **all there is** to Central Baptist is the "worship" service, the only candidates for "changes" are superficial things like adding the band to the singing part, and having the two pastors trade off on the preaching part. But this superficial "change" doesn't address the fundamental problem - your typical church is primarily the "worship" service, and until the "worship" service goes on the table with all the other negotiables, then the church is really still doing what it's always done.

But more disturbing was the protest, "You can't expect immediate results. Sometimes the results will take years to appear."

After decades, even perhaps a couple of centuries of "doing what we've always done", surely we ought to have seen *some* results by now. When a church is on the ropes for not seeing any results, surely it ought to reconsider "doing what we've always done". To continue polishing our cherished forms of "church" in the hopes that this time, maybe, it will pay off - this is a form of corporate insanity.

Campus Ministries: Last night, some young people and I went to "Overflow", which is a joint event put on by the University of Arizona campus Christian ministries every semestre. Some times, it's really *different* - a few years back, the Spring event was "The Stations of the Cross", and people circulated to various "stations" for teaching opportunities (hands-on, smell, taste, etc.). Usually, though, it's a "worship" service, with music (always an excellent band that leads worship, rather than just entertaining) and preaching (often with a really engaging speaker; some of my "Thoughts" here have been inspired by Overflow speakers). This time was a little bit different - it was *outside*, on the Mall, out where everyone could observe us worshipping, and we could be "bold" enough to be seen by them. Very good.



Or maybe not, since what those unbelievers were observing may just confirm their prejudice of what Christians do - sing songs and preach sermons.

Anyways, the music and the preaching was fine, as such things go, and the prayer time was good, and it ended just as the chilly breeze of a cloudy March evening started to blow. The final words of the speaker, and the final prayer of the designated ministry leaders: *Let us boldly share our faith with our fellow students and our professors, and lead them to Christ.*

Maybe boldness is what we need on campus. Maybe (probably) we need more than boldness; maybe we need a living faith to share. But telling the troops to just work harder isn't working. Most of these young people attend area churches, and I daresay they hear the same things there, too. **Doing the same things we've done for years and expecting something different to happen *this* time is a form of insanity.**

I'm not sure I've got any answers for the problem. I know a lot of people smarter and holier than I are talking about this and writing books and having conferences and such. But what we're doing ISN'T WORKING, but we KEEP DOING IT.

It sure feels strange living in the asylum.

February 14 2009: Recession and the Church



Obviously, we've been dealing with this economic downturn for some while now, and in spite of the "stimulus" bill that the Feds have now passed (or maybe because of it), the downturn will persist for some while yet. This has an effect not only on individuals and families but on churches as well. Here is an excellent article by [Andrew](#)

[Jones](#) about the legacy of Larry Burkett and the effect of the recession on professional ministers and churches.

The article makes two points that gel with other stuff I've been reading lately, like *Pagan Christianity* and *Revolution*, and coming from Down Under, where Andrew lives, it helps me understand that this is not just an American concern.

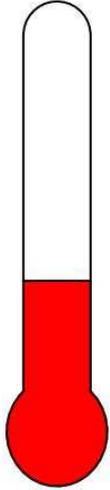
Paid Staff: First, the issue of people like pastors, music leaders, and ministry directors who go to expensive full-time seminaries and expect to find paid positions in churches where they can use this training (and maybe pay off their debts incurred from obtaining it). Andrew tells us that he has seen ministers come from the U.S. attracted by the possibilities, only to return when they found no paid staff positions. So much for following the Call of the Lord! Reminds me (one of my favorite stories, that some are perhaps tired of hearing) of the minister who told us (on the Personnel Committee) that he felt "called" to be our Youth Pastor, and then six months later resigned because he felt "called" to be the pastor of a local church (where the pay and prestige were better). How can these immigrant ministers think they are following the Call of the Lord if the proof of the Call depends on a salary?

Our pastor at Central Baptist has recently gotten a lay job. With a bank, no less, in mortgages, no less, in spite of the economy! I think it's great, and I thank God for it! Of course, he got a lay job so as to relieve the financial burden for the church to pay his salary, and it's unlikely he would have looked for a lay job if the church wasn't on the ropes financially. Nothing to do with the economy, really; it's more of a spiritual sickness (that isn't going to be solved with sermons on evangelism, guys; we've heard them all, and they never did any good any other time). Far better if he had gotten a lay job as part of a Spirit-led movement for the church to be more agile and able to expend financial resources on outreach and community projects. But here we are; hopefully, one way or the other, the Spirit is positioning us to be more effective as a *Real* church in our community. I hope and pray that other dinky churches could be similarly positioned, with their trained leadership finding lay jobs so as to remain on the mission field, instead of the leadership simply leaving (as those immigrant ministers did) for greener fields.

I guess it remains to be seen, when/if Central recovers from our spiritual downturn to the point where we *could* pay a pastor's salary, that the pastor would remain at his lay job for the sake of flexibility for the ministry, or give it up for the sake of the traditional full-time paid pastoral staff position.

Real Estate: Then there is the issue of having large, expensive buildings, usually obtained through debt. Andrew makes the excellent point of the problem church plants face, with the expectation that a church needs a building, and a growing church needs a bigger building. The current multi-million dollar model for the church is a daunting prospect for startups, yet that is the paradigm held by the denominations setting the rules for the startups. As Andrew points out, that money would be much better used for launching many more churches with a different model.

Victory!



The property is the other problem Central faces. Of course, it's not a multi-million dollar facility, and we are currently not in debt over it, but it *does* require a fair bit of upkeep. Right now, the parking lot needs to be resurfaced, and the amount to do the job right is well beyond our means. So we have responded in the usual ways: a fundraising campaign, complete with the "thermometer", and an exploration of getting a bank loan. That's just the most recent, and whether it's fixing the doors, fixing the A/C, fixing the cabinets in the childrens' department, painting, or just paying the electric and water bills, it's an expenditure of money on temporary things (maybe *very* temporary; if the church folds and the property gets sold to a developer, the building will likely be razed anyways) instead of eternal things.

So Whither? Andrew's article ends (as this one does) with a tie to the house church movement, churches that don't require full-time paid staff ministers or dedicated-purpose facilities, and therefore are largely immune to the effects of economic ebb and flow.

Our neighborhood in midtown Tucson has been looking at the building on 5th Street, if they notice it at all, and seeing a "church". A church that has had very little influence for Christ with the suspicious, keep-to-myself, anti-religion people that live in this neighborhood. How much better if they could look instead at some homes among them with families that are *Real Christians*, where groups gather several nights of the week for music and fellowship and teaching and planning service projects and encouraging each other in their own walks with Christ, as the Church. People whose evangelism is borne out of concern and love and cannot be mistaken for having ulterior motives of obtaining more members for propping up finances or an image of "success". We might be more effective that way.

Just seems to me that the leadership of churches, especially dinky, dying ones, ought to be developing an infrastructure that supports or transitions to these house church groups. If dying churches die, in the current model, the people will just go off to other dying churches to perpetuate the same defective model. If the church doesn't die, it remains ineffective, the very reason it came to the point of death in the first place.

January 28 2009: Small Chivalry

"The Tale of Despereaux" is the story of a young mouse born in a time of trouble in the country. Actually, there are three countries: The kingdom of men, plagued by drought and gloom. The corrupt colony of the rats in the sewer, where the rats, driven underground, have fallen under the control of a tyrant who treats them to feasts (of garbage and worms) and urges them to deeds of evil. And the pleasant town of the mice, where the inhabitants live in peace and isolation from the ugly world beyond their own, and their chief value is fear. The mice children are trained in their tradition of fear of cats, kitchen knives, the sewer, and generally anything outside of their own town.



Unfortunately for his family and friends, Despereaux is temperamentally incapable of mousely fear. They keep thinking he will "grow out of it", but at one point, hoping that the example of his older brother will have an effect, they send him out of town to the library in the castle, valued only as a source of food - the paper in the books. This proves to be a disaster, for instead of eating the books, Despereaux reads them; stories of knights and chivalry and captive princesses and deeds of valor, concepts that resonate with his already-unmously nature. Shortly he is discovered, and because he shows no inclination to accept the community's values of fear and scurrying, he is banished to the sewer. Then begin his great adventure.

Courage. Nobility. Virtue. Chivalry. Do these abstract concepts actually exist, or are they merely inventions of our Western traditions? Are they inherent in human nature, and as such should be encouraged and praised, or are they relics of a sexist, superstitious, impractical past that should be suppressed and replaced with "progressive" ideas like feminism, egalitarianism, "tolerance", and the like? What is the Christian take on this?

No question, we are to be courageous ([Joshua 1:9](#)). To some extent, this includes skill at arms, which even gentle Jesus recognized ([Luke 22:36](#)). We are expected to be willing to sacrifice ourselves ([Romans 12:1](#)), even for one another ([John 15:13](#)). We may be created equal before God ([Galatians 3:28](#)), but we are not equally gifted, and those who have greater gifts are expected to do greater things with them ([Luke 12:48](#)), whether these gifts come from inheritance or one's own character. Certainly the message of Creation ([Genesis 2-3](#)) and the New Testament (e.g. [Titus 2](#)) says that men and women have different roles, and there is the idea that men ought to be the protectors of the women ([I Peter 3:7](#)). The whole "courtly love" bit is a later accretion, and while we might find it enticingly heroic, it can be dismissed without damaging the core concepts of nobility.

Perhaps the flavour of "knights and ladies" reflects the the emphasis by the medieval Catholic Church to the cultural setting of the day. There is a different flavour from the

18th Century and the American Colonial period, seen in the values of the Founding Fathers and promoted by homeschool resources such as [Vision Forum](#). There is yet a different flavour found today among social conservatives and the armed forces (in particular, the Marine Corps). So the culturally-relevant pattern is found in many ages in different ways, but the core of virtue and nobility is always there.

How is this virtue developed in the character of the youth? Certainly the core found in Christianity should be imparted through discipleship - something the church in this age hasn't figured out how to do. Something that Despereaux' family and townspeople weren't doing, either. So how did Despereaux learn? From old books - and we have those today. Aurthurian stories, stories of Roland and Charlemagne. And some not so old: Lord of the Rings, Narnia, even Star Wars. Sometimes stories of nobility and virtue are intentional, as with Tolkein and Lewis, and sometimes they aren't, as with Lucas, but either way, stories of virtue and nobility are told in a way that engage the imagination of the young, and inspire them to imitation. Parents - and churches - ought to provide these resources, and encourage the youth. After all,

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these tings.

Philippians 4:8

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Perhaps like Despereaux' town, with its value of "being fearful", our own time, with the popularly promoted political correctness values of feminism and "tolerance" and secularism, doesn't appreciate concepts of courage, nobility, and chivalry, either. Perhaps in the same way, this results from too much peace and isolation from trouble in the outside world. Perhaps this is in part a failure to train up the next generation properly. In any event, "The Tale of Despereaux" did not fare very well at the box office. Amazingly, it came out about Christmastime, and just three or four weeks later, it is already in the discount theatres. The one we went to was almost empty. Perhaps an action picture (such as Lord of the Rings), where the nobility is in the background but the conflict (and special effects) are in the foreground, work better than a mouse movie where the nobility is center stage.

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One last thought: It wasn't Despereaux' courage and chivalry that saved the day. He *did* save the human princess from the morally-twisted rats, but it was a soup cook rebelling against the unreasonable law of the king that started the kingdom on its path out of despair. *Civil Disobedience*... that's another topic for another time!

January 24 2009: Reality Bites



A few weeks ago, we went to see "[Bolt](#)" with the Central young people. Yes, it was a Disney film, and those tend to be problematic, but this one got good marks from the various family-friendly reviewers (such as [Plugged-in Online](#)), so we tried it out.

Bolt is a dog that has been raised by the film studio to believe he has special powers in order to make his "acting" more natural. This has two unfortunate consequences:

- **First**, while he "belongs" to the little girl (who is also his co-star on the television program), neither of them can enjoy a dog/human relationship, because the studio can't permit his artificial sense of reality to be upset.
- **Second**, when he *does* escape from the studio into the *real world*, the fantasy of super powers and arch villains continues to dominate his behaviour until gradually, finally, through painful experience, truth breaks through.

Bolt is joined by a cat (or rather, Bolt captures a cat) with an understanding of reality that is more cynical but certainly more correct than Bolt's. After Bolt undergoes the paradigm shift out of his fantasy world, the cat helps to rehabilitate him to normal doggy values and activities. Before, however, the cat is endangered by Bolt's defective view of reality and is desperately trying to convince him of the falseness of his convictions, *but nothing the cat says has any effect on Bolt's worldview. He has to learn the truth for himself, the hard way.*

The fun thing about movies is, in spite of the producer's and artists' and actors' wrong perception of reality, the truth peeks through their work. They, and their audience, live in the *real world*, and they can't get very far away into their own fantasy world or it becomes incomprehensible. At some point, in spite of the overt message of the film (often a very contra-Truth message) and the acted-out and lived-out values and beliefs of the Hollywood set, the reality of what personhood is, or justice, or life beyond biological death, or real (versus merely sexual) love peeks through, and those who have a more correct understanding of reality can enjoy the contrast.

This is *especially* the case with "Bolt". Bolt is a great image for those who created him: lost in a fog of wrong beliefs and perceptions. Sometimes these people are kept from the real world by others, who may have an awareness - or even just a suspicion - of the real world, but hold their subjects in ignorance for selfish reasons. Sometimes these people get out in the *real world* and experience for themselves the pain of living out of accordance with reality:

- Ruined bodies and broken hearts from using sex selfishly, for mere physical

pleasure

- Guilt and depression from killing unborn babies
- Destroyed minds and the inability to hold a job from using drugs and alcohol to achieve a state of "pleasurable" intoxication
- Emptiness and boredom from acquiring wealth and spending it on entertainment and lavish comfort

And so on. Furthermore, even though there are other people out here in the *real world* with a more correct understanding of reality, nothing these other people can say will induce these deceived persons to reconsider their perceptions. They have to realize for themselves that the pain they are suffering is caused by their concept of reality colliding with what reality actually *is*. Only then can those other people help them rebuild their lives into more what people are supposed to be, and enjoy a proper relationship with the One who actually owns them.

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This is starting to sound like my usual rant against evangelism. I suppose that the movie would not have been as interesting if the cat had never tried to influence the dog, but had merely been dragged around in silent despair. Of course, the cat's interest in "converting" Bolt to reality was selfish - she didn't want to die as a result of the dog's misguided actions. Maybe American Christians are more motivated by not wanting to be dragged down by the agendas of the misguided Hollywood and Washington elites than any actual concern for those elites as persons deserving love and rescue.

But maybe it is more than that. At the risk of pushing the analogy too far, maybe most Christians are like the cat who, although possessing a more healthy understanding of reality than Bolt, nonetheless lacks a healthy understanding of a relationship with a human owner. Perhaps Western Christians also largely lack a proper relationship with our God - and that is why our evangelism is so often formal, strained... and unfruitful.